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Dangerous Missile Battle In Space

Fifth Act In U.S. Missile Shield Drama

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Wars have brought untold horrors upon Europe over the centuries, especially the two world wars of the last one. Until now, though, the continent has been spared the ultimate cataclysm of a missile war.

Though twenty years after the end of the Cold War recent news articles contain reports that would have been shocking even during the depths of the East-West conflict in Europe that followed World War II.

A dispatch quoting a Finnish defense official two days ago bore the title "US could launch missiles from the Baltic Sea" and a U.S. armed forces website yesterday spoke in reference to proposed missile shield plans of "a big, complex, dangerous battle in the space over Europe."

On September 28 a feature called "BMD fleet plans Europe defense mission" appeared in the Navy Times which reported that "Ballistic-missile defense warships have become the keystone in a new national strategy....Rather than field sensors and missiles on the ground in Poland and the Czech Republic, the U.S. will first maintain a presence of at least two or three Aegis BMD ships in the waters around Europe, starting in 2011." [1]

This development is in keeping with U.S Pentagon chief Robert Gates' presentation of September 17 in which, confirming President Obama's announcement to replace and supplement his predecessor's project of placing ten ground-based interceptor missiles in Poland and a complementary radar installation in the Czech Republic, he laid out a three-step strategy to enhance (his word) U.S. missile shield plans in Europe.

In a Defense Department briefing with Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright, Gates explained the logic behind the shift.

"Over the last few years, we have made great strides with missile defense, particularly in our ability to counter short-and-medium-range missiles. We now have proven capabilities to intercept these ballistic missiles with land-and-sea-based interceptors supported by much-improved sensors.

"These capabilities offer a variety of options to detect, track and shoot down enemy missiles. This allows us to deploy a distributive sensor network rather than a single fixed site, like the kind slated for the Czech Republic, enabling greater survivability and adaptability." [2]

That is, as Russian officials have over the past two years openly stated that the stationary

missile radar facility intended for the Czech Republic and silo-based missiles planned for Poland would be targeted by their own missiles if the U.S. went ahead with the deployments, mobile and rapidly deployable alternatives would have, in Gates' terms, "greater survivability and adaptability."

Land-based facilities are easy to monitor and, if the suspicion arose that they would be part of an imminent first strike attack, neutralize.

Sea-based, air-based and spaced-based surveillance and missile deployments would be harder – if not impossible – to track and to take out.

Referring to the hitherto exclusively ship-based Standard Missile-3 (SM-3), which nineteen months ago proved capable of shooting down a satellite in space, Gates offered further details:

"We have…improved the Standard Missile 3, the SM-3, which has had eight successful flight tests since 2007. These tests have amply demonstrated the SM-3's capability and have given us greater confidence in the system and its future….In the initial stage, we will deploy Aegis ships equipped with SM-3 interceptors, which provide the flexibility to move interceptors from one region to another if needed."

The second stage of the Pentagon's updated European missile shield program will entail the basing of "upgraded, land-based SM-3s."

"Consultations have begun with allies, starting with Poland and the Czech Republic, about hosting a land-based version of the SM-3 and other components of the system," Gates revealed.

In language that progressively reflected what sounds like plans to withstand a first – or second strike – in Europe's first missile war, Gates added, "Over time, this architecture is designed to continually incorporate new and more effective technologies, as well as more interceptors, expanding the range of coverage, improving our ability to knock down multiple targets and increasing the survivability of the overall system.

"This approach also provides us with greater flexibility to adapt to developing threats and evolving technologies…."

The threat repeatedly invoked by the Pentagon chief was, of course, Iran. The inverted logic of the earlier George W. Bush administration program, of which Gates himself was a major architect, ran something like this: Missiles in Poland and an X-band long-range radar installation in the Czech Republic would protect the continental United States from Iranian intercontinental ballistic missiles, which the nation neither possesses nor, as both Gates and Obama themselves conceded on September 17, was likely to in the foreseeable future.

But once the U.S. went ahead with the deployments Iran could target both sites with medium-range missiles, the argument continued. So America pledged to station 96 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missiles in batteries manned by U.S. soldiers who would be based in Poland for the first time.

Thus Poland and the Czech Republic were transformed from sites for missile shield deployments to allegedly protect the U.S. to potential targets that needed to be protected

by…the U.S.

The Patriot missiles in Poland, which are still slated to be sent and activated there, can no longer be presented as protecting American ground-based interceptor missiles in that nation, as that plan was officially scrapped twelve days ago. So why are they going to be deployed in spite of that?

The Patriot deployment was never intended to defend Poland against Iranian attacks, but to counter Russian plans to station mobile short-range missiles in its non-contiguous territory of Kaliningrad, which borders Poland, in response to what Russia necessarily viewed as a threat to its strategic missile forces. Bluntly put, U.S. ground-based missiles in Poland could be part of a system to destroy whatever long-range missiles Russia had left after a U.S. and NATO first strike.

As adviser to Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Slawomir Nowak, was quoted on September 24 as admitting, "We were never really threatened by a long-range missile attack from Iran." [3]

Six days afterward Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski confirmed that 96 Patriot missiles will be deployed in his nation as scheduled and, moreover, will be armed.

As their deployment can no longer exploit the pretext of defending U.S. long-range missile sites from imaginary Iranian "preemptive" attacks, its purpose is demonstrated to be the what missile shield opponents have always asserted it was: To "protect" Poland from Russia.

The Polish newspaper that first revealed the shift in U.S. missile designs in Europe weeks before the event, the Gazeta Wyborcza, reported on September 25 some details of the new system as it will affect Poland:

"The concept would include a stationary rocket battery and possibly a number of mobile interceptor launchers. This might be a supplement to the envisaged American system of SM-3 naval based anti-rockets. Polish military experts say that equally important would be US military presence in Poland, which would provide an additional security guarantee." [4]

What mobile missile launchers ready for practically overnight deployment to Russia's neighbor might look like was indicated at last month's annual Space and Missile Defense Conference held by the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency in Huntsville, Alabama where the prototype of a nearly 50,000-pound "two-stage interceptor designed to be globally deployable within 24 hours" [5] to be stationed as needed at NATO bases throughout Europe was presented by the arms manufacturer eager to produce it, Chicago-based Boeing Company.

In his September 17th briefing at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Gates also announced plans to "deploy new sensors and interceptors, in northern and southern Europe." He tactfully did not specify where in the north and south of the continent the "capabilities…to detect, track and shoot down enemy missiles" would be placed, but their likely destinations are not hard to determine.

The former head of the Russian Strategic Missile Force, General Viktor Yesin, commented last week on one probability:

“Now we only need to be sure that the U.S. plans with regard to strengthening the ABM capability will not create a situation where warships armed with such systems will be moved from the North and Mediterranean seas to the Black Sea, which would pose a threat to Russia’s strategic nuclear forces.” [6]

An analyst from the same country, Sergei Roy, gave vent to similar apprehensions in a roundtable discussion in Russia Profile on September 25:

“If anything, that episode [projected U.S. radar in the Czech Republic to be aimed at Russia and not Iran], like so many others in recent history, should teach Russians to view any U.S. move in ABM defense (as in any other ‘defense’ area) with sober caution rather than credulous enthusiasm. My first idea on hearing of Obama opting for sea-based Standard-3 anti-missiles instead of those in Poland was: ‘hey, which sea?’ If it’s the Mediterranean and the North Sea, that’s OK, but what about the Black Sea or, God forbid, the Baltic? Those missiles will be much closer to Russia, while still in international waters or those of Ukraine or Georgia (why not Estonia’s, then?), and who will give a written guarantee that they are strictly anti-missile missiles? What about those early warning radar stations? Will they be based in Israel and Turkey – or in Georgia and/or Ukraine?” [7]

The Gazeta Wyborcza last month broke the news that the Pentagon intended to shift major missile shield emphasis to the Balkans, Israel and Turkey. Subsequent reports have focused on the South Caucasus nations of Georgia and Azerbaijan as locations for the extension of missile interception networks closer to Iran and to Russia’s southern border.

The Navy Times report cited at the beginning of this piece discussed the transfer of missile shield hardware and priority to the Balkans, the Black Sea region and the Middle East and mentioned as an example the USS Stout, an Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyer. Last summer the ship had been deployed for naval maneuvers in the Eastern Mediterranean with Israel and Turkey [Operation Reliant Mermaid] and then moved into the Black Sea in its first deployment as part of the Pentagon’s Aegis sea-based interceptor missile system. The USS Stout visited NATO members Bulgaria and Romania and NATO candidate nation Georgia while on the Black Sea mission. While visiting the third country it participated in a joint military exercise with its host’s navy directly south of Abkhazia, which could be the site of a fresh Caucasus war at any moment.

At least as far back as February of 2008, the U.S. Missile Defense Agency director of the time, Lieutenant General Henry Obering, spoke of adding a third interceptor missile component to those intended for Poland and the Czech Republic, saying that “The powerful, ‘forward based’ radar system would go in southeastern Europe, possibly in Turkey, the Caucasus or the Caspian Sea region….” [8]

So the expansion of the American and NATO missile interception system along a new trajectory that starts in the Balkans and progresses along Russia’s southern border and eastward towards China’s is nothing new.

The implementation of it currently being witnessed is new. And dangerous. Innovations in the interceptor missile system devised by the Pentagon will place greater emphasis on “ballistic-missile defense warships” to be deployed and moved around “in the waters around Europe.” [9]

“Europe there will be a need for more, modernized cruisers capable of firing the SM-3 and

more advanced missiles to come. This might have an effect on the ultimate Navy build program." [10]

As one American missile expert phrased it, the commanders of such vessels have been put "on a par with [ballistic-missile submarine] commanders."

The Pentagon's project of stationing as many as 100 SM-s, initially, on ships off the coasts of European nations and on their territory could lead to a situation in which "a BMD captain could be responsible for a big, complex, dangerous battle in the space over Europe, needing to fire dozens of missiles to try to destroy dozens of attackers." [11]

The immediate reference was to Iran, again, but with implications for Russia as missile killer ship deployments in the Baltic and Black Seas would not be limited to or even primarily directed at Iran.

In a September 27 news article from an Icelandic source called "US could launch missiles from the Baltic Sea" spokesperson for the Department of Strategic and Defence Studies at Finland's National Defence University, Commander Juha-Antero Puistola, stated "If the idea is to create this type of mobile platform, then some of the ships can well be placed in the Baltic. The Aegis cruisers have always been moved wherever needed." [12]

On the following day Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin stated that the U.S. "missile defense program is becoming less predictable with missile shield elements deployed in the Arctic as the worst-case scenario…." [13]

An earlier article in this series – U.S. Missile Shield Plans: Retreat Or Advance? – pointed out that "The major drawback [for the U.S.] of ground-based missiles in Poland is that they would be fixed-site deployments. For several years now Russia has warned that it was prepared to base Iskander theater ballistic missiles in its Kaliningrad region, which borders Poland, should Washington deploy its missiles to that nation." [14]

Rogozin shared that perspective in acknowledging "We knew for sure that there would be ten interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in Czech Republic, and that we wpuld have our Iskander [missiles] in the Kaliningrad Region…now the U.S. missile elements are to be based on U.S. cruisers, and you can never tell where they will be tomorrow." [15]

Why he has been so tardy in realizing the threat of U.S. ship- and submarine-based missile and anti-missile plans in the Arctic Ocean is puzzling, as the National Security Presidential Directive of January 9, 2009 made no attempt to disguise the White House's and the Pentagon's intentions in that respect. Toward the beginning of the document it is stated:

"The United States has broad and fundamental national security interests in the Arctic region and is prepared to operate either independently or in conjunction with other states to safeguard these interests. These interests include such matters as missile defense and early warning; deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift, strategic deterrence, maritime presence, and maritime security operations; and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight." [16]

NATO held its first-ever top-level meeting – attended by its secretary general, its two top military commanders and the chairman of its Military Committee – on the Arctic seventeen days after the U.S. National Security Directive was released and also broadcast in no equivocal terms interest in expanding its presence into what it called the High North.

A plan that was outlined yesterday by Rogozin as follows:

“The ice would retreat, it would melt, which means that NATO would definitely be present in the Arctic. They have been planning it for a long time, and under very bad circumstances the U.S. strategic missile defense would arrive there on board these ships.” [17]

An insightful and penetrating commentary appeared in The Nation of Pakistan on September 26 which linked U.S. President Obama’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 23 with his statements on missile defense six days earlier.

The author, Shireen M. Mazari, wrote that “many of us have been living with these periodic highs at the declaratory level on the issue of nuclear arms control and disarmament – till we realize they are merely a rhetorical facade to hide away the growing nuclear arsenals of the nuclear weapon states.”

And if White House pledges to reduce or even eliminate nuclear weapons sound something less than sincere – Ronald Reagan’s 1983 Star Wars speech included a proclaimed commitment “to lower the level of all arms, and particularly nuclear arms” – than so do American pronouncements that the nation’s global missile interception system will eliminate or even diminish the threat of dangerous and perhaps catastrophic confrontations.

The Pakistani writer added:

“So there will be no BMD [Ballistic Missile Defense] placements in Poland and the Czech Republic but there will be BMD systems placed on highly mobile sea platforms to counter a largely imagined threat to Europe and the US from Iran.

“Of course, these ships can be moved easily from the Mediterranean to the Gulf or Indian Ocean so Pakistan would also come into this BMD target loop – again with India being helped in the development and acquisition of BMD as part of its strategic military alliance with the US.

“BMD has also undermined deterrence which was sustained through mutual vulnerabilities.

“Now BMD has focused attention on nuclear war fighting, thereby increasing the danger of nuclear weapons being used in war.

“Unfortunately, while Obama may call for nuclear disarmament, his policy on BMD betrays this rhetoric.” [18]

The preceding paragraphs are as terse yet comprehensive a summation as can be found of the threat the U.S.’s new flexible, mobile and technologically advanced international missile shield strategy presents for raising rather than lowering world tensions, for dropping the threshold of a U.S. and allied missile war being launched because of the perceived invulnerability of the aggressor and, the ultimate worst-case scenario, for nuclear war whether intended or not. A nuclear war which would transform Europe and much of the rest of the world into a gigantic necropolis.

Notes

1) Navy Times, September 28, 2009

2) U.S. Department of Defense, September 17, 2009
3) Reuters, September 24, 2009
4) Polish Radio, September 25, 2009
5) Reuters, August 20, 2009
6) Izvestia, September 22, 2009
7) Russia Profile, September 25, 2009
8) Reuters, February 12, 2008
9) Navy Times, September 28, 2009
10) Defense Procurement News, September 18, 2009
11) Navy Times, September 28, 2009
12) Ice News, September 27, 2009
13) Russian Information Agency Novosti, September 28, 2009
14) Stop NATO, September 17, 2009
15) Russian Information Agency Novosti, September 28, 2009
16) http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-66.htm
17) Russian Information Agency Novosti, September 28, 2009
18) Shireen M Mazari, The facade of nuclear disarmament
The Nation, September 26, 2009
